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PROGRAM Issues & Answers

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SUBJECT Full Text: An Interview with Director Turner

BOB CLARK: Our guest is Admiral Stansfield Turner, the Director of the CIA. Admiral, welcome to "Issues and Answers."

ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER: Thank you.

CLARK: Iran appears to be near political chaos at the moment with the return of the Ayatollah Khomeini and his threat of a holy war unless the Bakhtiar government steps down. Can you give us an appraisal of the seriousness of the situation there, including the danger of it all degenerating into civil war?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, we have a difficult situation with the forces of Ayatollah Khomeini, on the one hand, wanting very rapid change of both the personalities and the form of the government, and the forces of Prime Minister Bakhtiar wanting to insure that any change that takes place is done in a constitutional manner, in accordance with the Iranian Constitution. The next few days, it seems to me, are going to be very critical in this process to see if an accommodation, an arrangement can be made so that this happens peacefully and smoothly.

I can only say, Mr. Clark, I think we all must hope that the Iranian people who've suffered considerably in the past several months are going to come through these next few days in a peaceful and quick solution to this problem.

CLARK: Would you be assured that we are getting adequate intelligence on what is going on in Iran at the moment, that we are on top of the situation and up to the minute on developments that are occurring there?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I believe we have very good information

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today. On the other hand, this is a very complex domestic situation in which it's difficult to predict and forecast exactly what's going to happen. We are able to keep our decision-makers as well informed as possible, however.

JOHN SCALI: Admiral, has the intelligence community come up with a single estimate on what the odds are that there will be civil war regardless of the present uncertainties?

ADMIRAL TURNER: No, I don't think you can put a number on that, Mr. Scali.

SCALI: Well, why don't you? It would seem to me that information of that kind would be indispensable for our policy-makers in trying to decide what to do. It would appear to be the ultimate disaster....

ADMIRAL TURNER: It's much more important for our policy-makers instead of giving them a precise 52 1/2% probability estimate to let them know what we believe are the mechanics behind the scene -- what are the forces that are driving in one direction, and what are the forces driving in the other -- so that they can understand the complex of pressures that are moving that country in one or another directions. I think that's the best we can do, and it helps them to understand the people who are managing the operation and what their particular views are. That's what's important.

SCALI: But if the President turns to you and says "Stan, what are the odds that we're going to have civil war in Iran?," right now you can't quantify it in any way?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, I'll give him my opinion on it, yes. I don't know that I'll put a number on it, but I'll give him an estimate.

CLARK: And Admiral, your predecessor as the Director of the CIA, George Bush, was on this program last week. He didn't seem to accept President Carter's confidence that the loss of listening posts or the surveillance sites on the Soviet border in Iran could be made up in other countries, such as Turkey. Are you with the President on this or with Mr. Bush?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Let me say this, that in the world of intelligence there're certain things we can talk about and there're certain things we cannot. I'm trying in my term as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency to be as open with the public as possible. It's one of the reasons I'm here with you today, of course. On the other hand, I must also preserve our intelligence capabilities. And we can't have those unless we have some secrets. One of the secrets that we must keep is how we go about collecting information, because the minute you divulge that, it becomes so much more difficult to do it.

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So we just have a policy of not talking about how we collect information, whether it's from Iran or any place else in the world.

CLARK: I didn't mean to ask you about the hows. But Mr. Bush, who made much the same statement you have just made now last week, but he did say, and these are his words: "We have major verification problems facing the United States today." And he obviously related that problem to Iran.

Would you agree with that?

ADMIRAL TURNER: If you're talking about the problems that face our country in verifying SALT, both with respect to the future of Iran and all sorts of other ways in which we collect intelligence, I want to say that my role, as Director of Central Intelligence, is to let the President and, of course, in due course, the Senate know what our sense of certainty is that we can verify each provision of that treaty. And there are many of them that we have to verify. It's going to be a very complex explanation. I'm prepared to make that to the United States Senate when the treaty's been negotiated. The details of it are something one can't just discuss in public.

SCALI: Admiral, in Morocco, the Shah said yesterday that there still is an important silent majority on his side in Iran and that all is not irredeemably lost for him and the Monarchy. Would you agree with that?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I would want to say that there clearly are wide differences of opinion inside Iran as to which way that country should go. For me to take a position on my side or another might be interpreted as attempting to influence those events. And again, I say that we all want this to come out correctly and peacefully in accordance with what the Iranian people want. And I don't want to meddle in that by anything I say.

SCALI: Well, but you said that the next few days would be critical. What do you foresee as the danger during this period of time? And could it lead to an explosion?

ADMIRAL TURNER: The danger is if they can't find an accommodation between the two approaches I described towards resolving what kind of a government is going to lead Iran in the months and the years ahead. There could be an explosion if they can't reach a peaceful agreement.

CLARK: And Admiral Turner, as you are well aware by now, I'm sure, both President Carter and the House Committee on Intelligence have complained about the quality of American intelligence reports in Iran. The House committee says the blame has to be shared by both the intelligence agencies, including the CIA, and the policy-makers, presumably including the President and perhaps Mr. Brzezinski.

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Was there a failure on the part of the CIA to foresee the dangers to the Shah's government and what those dangers could mean to America's interests in the area?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Clearly we would like to have done better. But let me point out to you that if we're realistic about this and predicting how well we will do in future situations like this, forecasting political upheavals and military coups and unexpected election results is probably the most difficult part of intelligence, more difficult than military or economic intelligence. I know of no other intelligence service that predicted the problems in Iran. I know of no newspaper or academic journalists who predicted them in their writings. Clearly this caught up with the Shah without his recognizing it. I would suggest even Ayatollah Khomeini didn't realize how well his force was moving along.

And the reason I think for all of this is that as we reconstructed our reporting over last summer and fall, clearly we saw lots of dissidence, for religious reasons, for cultural, for political, for economic. It was like a series of volcanos bubbling. But it certainly appeared that no one of them would bubble up so much the government couldn't control it.

What we didn't forecast was that a single man, a 78 year old cleric, who'd been in exile for fourteen years, would be a catalyst that would bring these forces together and we had one huge volcano, a truly national revolution. It means we've got to do better at looking at the socio-political happenings in countries. It's not easy. But we're not Avis; we're not number two. But we're going to try harder.

CLARK: Admiral Turner, if I may just point up the seriousness of the problem; quote a couple of lines from the House committee report. And it said -- it quoted from CIA studies that said, quote, "The Shah will be an active participant in Iranian life well into the 1980s."

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's not from a CIA study. If that is a quote from the report, it's incorrect.

SCALI: Well, I have one that is. It says "Iran is not in a revolutionary, or even a pre-revolutionary situation."

ADMIRAL TURNER: That is not from a CIA study, but it was from a draft study, which I rejected. And you know, on the one hand, people say you don't have enough dissent in your estimating process. I want dissenting views like that, which were not accepted by the system, to come forward.

SCALI: But Admiral, your agency dissented only after the State Department intelligence branch very strongly disagreed with the draft estimate that everybody was seeking to put together as a national

intelligence.....

ADMIRAL TURNER: Mr. Scali, you are absolutely, totally wrong. I know what happened in that estimate. I rejected that estimate before any comment came from the State Department.

SCALI: There weren't any differences with State Department at any time in that estimate?

ADMIRAL TURNER: If there are no differences when an estimate is prepared, I am very unhappy. I want differences. And that's why we have a Defense estimating agency, a State Department estimating agency, and a CIA estimating agency. We want these differences to come forward. And, yes, there were lots of differences. But what you are both quoting is simply a draft that never saw the light of day.

SCALI: I'm quoting the House -- I'm quoting the House report.

CLARK: There is a difference in nuances here over whether these were staff studies intended.....

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's correct.

CLARK: ...But can you tell us -- are you saying that you gave the President and the National Security Council adequate intelligence warning about what might be happening in Iran?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I think I described what I gave to them to you already. I said we did report that there were lots of groups of dissidents within the country. We did not....

SCALI: But the President said....

ADMIRAL TURNER: ...forecast that on the 5th of November this would suddenly well up into one big eruption that led to the departure of the Shah.

CLARK: But did you warn the President? I believe you see the President once or twice a week....

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes.

CLARK: ...and give him detailed briefings.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes.

CLARK: Did you warn him that a situation was developing that was so critical it could pose very grave dangers for the United States in that area of the world?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I've described exactly what we did.

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CLARK: You did? I didn't hear you say that. But did you?.

ADMIRAL TURNER: I said we did not predict that this would come to a head in the force and the strength that it did.

SCALI: Well, the President was so dissatisfied that it has been disclosed that he gave you a handwritten note saying he was dissatisfied with the quality of political intelligence, and this was addressed not only to you, but to the State Department and to Mr. Brzezinski.

ADMIRAL TURNER: I think that Mr. Vance, Dr. Brzezinski and myself were all pleased to receive that note. One is pleased when your boss tells you what you can do to serve him better. The tenor of the note and the tone of it that has been described in the press is greatly over-played.

SCALI: You were pleased to hear that he was dissatisfied?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I was pleased to have a suggestion from the President on how the three of us can serve him better. Mr. Scali, that's not the first time I've heard from the President in writing and orally on how I can do my job better for him.

SCALI: Well, have you improved the product since then, sir?

ADMIRAL TURNER: We're doing our best to improve it every day. It's not something you can turn around like that or like a light switch. I mean....

SCALI: But what have you heard from those who use your material as to whether it's better than it used to be?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Let me refer you to a number of quotations from the President, both before and after this note that you refer to. He has consistently said he is very pleased. And one of the greatest surprises of his administration since he took over was the quality of the reporting from the Central Intelligence Agency.

CLARK: Well Admiral Turner, if I may note, the President, at a recent press, also expressed concern that the CIA was leaning too heavily on science and technology in its surveillance procedures and not heavily enough on the human side. Isn't that a serious criticism?

ADMIRAL TURNER: What he is saying -- and it's very true -- is that over the last ten or fifteen years the burgeoning capabilities of technical intelligence seem to have caught people's attention more than the human. The human has been continuing, but it hasn't received the accent and the attention that it deserves.

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In my view, as we gain more capability to obtain information through these technical means, it usually tells you what happened some place sometime in the past. And what you need to do is complement that with the human intelligence element that tries to find out for you why are people doing that and what's going to happen tomorrow. So it's a teamwork effort.

CLARK: We're going to take a short break here. We will be back in just a moment with more issues and answers.

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CLARK: Our guest is Admiral Stansfield Turner, the Director of the CIA. And with me is ABC News correspondent John Scali.

SCALI: Admiral, shortly after you took office, you eliminated 820 positions, mostly held by some of the senior officers in CIA. This has been referred to by some of your critics as the Halloween massacre. But be that as it may, as you look back and as you ponder the problems in Iran and the uncertainty of information, do you think that perhaps you made an error in getting rid of some of your more seasoned clandestine operators? In other words, could it have been better had you moved more slowly?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Absolutely not. Everyone in the Central Intelligence Agency knew for years that this boil had to be lanced, that we were overstaffed. And we have, in fact, improved our clandestine intelligence capability as a result of that reduction, because the reduction came almost entirely out of the headquarters where we were overstaffed and where we were getting in each other's way and impeding the progress.

On top of that, Mr. Scali, one of the reasons for this is that we were bunched at the top with a whole lot of people of about the same age. And I feel a great responsibility to assure we're going to have a good CIA ten years from now. And you have to have incentives for the young people. You have to have the system moving along so that people will have the experience in three or four years to take those top positions. That was not the case before. Morale, attitude, opportunity for the younger, bright people is much better today.

SCALI: January 12 was supposed to be a deadline for some senior officers to seek early retirement, if they wished. And as I understand it, a substantial number have applied to leave. My question that arises to me is if they are happy with their work and if they feel they're contributing, why are they getting out early in a large number?

ADMIRAL TURNER: The number is somewhat larger than before. But the incentives that our government has created for people today

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are, in fact, encouraging people to leave the government. And it's very unfortunate. Many of these people have a longer and better retirement opportunity if they leave now than if they wait a year or two. And that's just the way the system's been structured. And it's very, very....

SCALI: Is your expert on -- your top expert on Iran among those who is leaving?

ADMIRAL TURNER: The man who was the most seasoned or the longest man on Iran, not necessarily the best or the most senior, but the one who'd been on that account the longest, did retire on 12th, January, and perfectly voluntarily on his part.

CLARK: Admiral Turner, let's talk a little bit, if we may, about the Soviet Union and the KGB....

ADMIRAL TURNER: Fine.

CLARK: ...and what some of its problems in Iran may be. Is the Soviet Union trying to exploit the situation in Iran?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Oh, yes, they try to exploit any opportunity where there's unrest around the world. However, I would suggest that listening to the tone of propaganda coming out of the Soviet Union back in September, October, they were in the same position as we. I believe, particularly because they're a police state, they felt that these bubbles of discontent would be kept under control. It wasn't until it became clear that the Shah's days were numbered that they came out as stridently as they are today against the Shah's government.

CLARK: Do you see any signs that the Soviet is trying to foment a civil war, which might end up with leftists or Marxist elements in control of the government in Iran?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I can't say we have concrete evidence of that. One certainly is suspicious.

CLARK: Can you tell us any more about those suspicions? Are they specific or just....?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Just general.

SCALI: There are reports that weapons are now finding their way into Iran and that some of this is coming both from PLO sources and some unidentified sources in Afghanistan, which has a very heavy Soviet influence. Would you suspect the Soviets are behind this?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I'm not able to comment on specific items of intelligence like that, as you well know from your days as an

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Ambassador. You know, the biggest problem we have today in intelligence is keeping those secrets we have to keep. And one of those is information like this which just can't be shared. I wish it could.

SCALI: Could the Soviets be behind a recent recording which purports to be the voice of the Shah, urging his generals to provoke a civil war so that he, in turn, could someday return to power?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, there's no question that they could. And as disturbed a situation as you have in Iran today, you're going to find true recordings, forged recordings; true documents, forged documents. You have to look on these with very great caution. It's difficult to tell the difference between the genuine and the fake.

SCALI: Well, is the one that I'm talking about a forgery, as some people claim?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, if I were to give my opinion on that, it could be interpreted as trying to influence events in Iran. And I don't want to do that. On top of that, Mr. Scali, it's my understanding that your competitors on NBC say one thing and the others on CBS say the next. I wonder if this network shouldn't be the adjudicator of that and....

CLARK: Well, I'm afraid we were on one side, so we couldn't be the adjudicator.

I want to move on to another topic. The CIA obviously is gathering information about the spread of the Islamic movement into other parts of the Middle East. Could you give us your appraisal of how serious this is? Is it something, for instance, that could pose a serious threat to Saudi Arabia?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, I believe one of the factors here is that when you are a member of the Islamic faith and Mecca is the center of your world and you see after all of these years since Mohammed's day that Mecca, Saudi Arabia, is, in fact, much more a center of power in the world today, you have renewed enthusiasm and faith that your teachings in Islam are coming true. So, yes, there is a new enthusiasm for Islamic fundamentalism in many of these countries. But each one is uniquely different as to its society, its culture and its government apparatus. I don't see Saudi Arabia being in an imminent problem of any sort.

CLARK: But do you see this new enthusiasm for fundamentalist Islamic faith a dangerous element that we're going to have to watch very closely? Could it, for instance, inspire radical elements in the Arab world to have a go at seizing power in Saudi Arabia?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, there appears to be a conflict between

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going too far back to fundamental Islamic tenets and adapting a society to the modern ways of doing life in the Western world. When you have that kind of a conflict, you may have turmoil internally that could lead to an opening for radical elements. But they are not directly aligned with the Islamic fundamentalism.

CLARK: Though a number of them are active in Iran today.

ADMIRAL TURNER: They will try to take advantage of any situation of turmoil that exists. That's for sure.

SCALI: Admiral, does the seeming collapse of Iran as our major ally open up the anti-communist defense line that we've been trying to create for stability in the Middle East? And if so, do you think that the problem is so acute that something has to be done?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I don't think any of us can answer that fully until we see what kind of a government emerges in Iran.

SCALI: But even at best, it won't be a very major and helpful and strong American ally.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, it just depends. As it turned out, the previous government wasn't a good ally when it couldn't stay in power. If we get a stable government there that has the support of the people, it's quite possible it could be. It's just very difficult to forecast this far ahead.

CLARK: And Admiral Turner, as you know, Vice Premier Teng of China has been warning Americans this week about the war-mongering Russians. Do you see a serious threat of war between Russia and China somewhere in the future?

ADMIRAL TURNER: No. It's possible, of course, that something will break out on that troubled border. They've had a number of incidents in the last ten or fifteen years, none of them major. One has to be apprehensive, however, when you have large forces and a lot of adverse rhetoric against each other between those two big countries. And obviously, as you're well aware, Mr. Clark, things are very tense in Southeast Asia today where both the Chinese and the Soviets are backing different countries. So it's a dangerous situation.

CLARK: But why does the Soviet Union keep so many divisions mustered on the Chinese border? And you count them every few days, I gather, by surveillance satellite.

ADMIRAL TURNER: The Soviets have, since they split with the Chinese, a very strong antagonism there. It goes in both directions. And they keep a large force there, one assumes, because they're interested in impressing the Chinese that they, the Soviets,

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are the superior military power.

SCALI: Admiral, there's a new report that the death of the former CIA executive John Paisley, who was discovered at the bottom of the Potomac, somehow is linked to a major security breach in the CIA and that some highly classified CIA papers were found both in his home, his boat and in the office, and that these papers are the kind that should never have been allowed out of the CIA. Now this has been a published report. Is it true?

ADMIRAL TURNER: It's false. Let me say these three things about Mr. Paisley. First of all, I want it clear that the Central Intelligence Agency has no authority to investigate the cause of death of an American citizen in this country. Secondly, the Central Intelligence Agency has cooperated absolutely fully with all those authorities that have investigated it -- the Maryland State Police, the FBI, the committees of Congress. And if you ask any of them....

CLARK: The third point, please, because we're about out of time.

ADMIRAL TURNER: ...there's been no hesitation.

The third is I'm very distressed at the amount of irresponsibly inaccurate reporting such as this, which is totally false.

CLARK: I'm sorry we have to end on that note. But we are out of time. Thank you very much for being with us on "Issues and Answers."

ADMIRAL TURNER: Pleased to be here. Thank you.